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22 September 1986

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

FROM: Douglas J. MacEachin
Director of Soviet Analysis

SUBJECT: SSCI Comments on Soviet Intelligence Estimates

REFERENCE: Memo from DCI to D/SOVA, same subject, dated 2 September 1986

1. Action Requested. No action requested. This memorandum responds to your request for my thoughts on the SSCI comments on our estimates reflected in Sy Weiss's memorandum of his session with Committee members.

2. Background. I would start with the point Sy makes in his final paragraph, where he says he noted for the Committee that many of the ideas the Committee members raised were in fact being adopted, but got no reaction. Sy recommends that the Committee be informed about the innovative approaches CIA has adopted--if this hasn't already been done. In fact, I know the Committee has had sessions along these lines with Bob Gates and others. I doubt if communications with the Committee are going to turn the members around, but I think a session with them regarding your new approaches would be useful. Certainly, the approach you have taken recently goes a long way toward correcting those flaws of legitimate concern to the Committee.

3. One point I think should be made is that ideas which are "new" and "innovative" aren't necessarily correct; and what is new and innovative when done by outside experts often would be considered irresponsible if done by the Intelligence Community. Policy makers don't need ideas for their own sake, or to serve as straw men. Unlike Professor So-and-So, we have to stand behind our estimates.

4. On the other hand, I have a great deal of sympathy for the notion that we need to be more tolerant of and make a greater effort to display what Senator Nunn referred to as "maverick views," when they stand the test of thoughtful rigor and when they are presented in a responsible manner. In this regard, I frankly think CIA too often leaves the "alternative views" to other NFIB agencies, and we try too hard to avoid saying things that will prompt articulated disagreements--we don't care for alternative views even when they are not our own.

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5. I think it is the general lack of receptivity to disturbing, potentially boat-rocking views that is the root cause of most of the individual problems cited by the members. For example, the Committee complains that the estimative process is not positioned to anticipate possible major changes in policy. But the idea of major change, when it first surfaces, is usually treated as a maverick idea. The issue of changing Soviet outlook on nuclear war is a case in point. In the latest NIE, this issue is a source of split text, which is as it should be, given the range of views. Had we tried to get it into an NIE when we first developed the analysis (over a year ago), however, I doubt that we would have been able to insert it into the text or even a footnote. At that point in time it was a maverick idea. Similarly, I think the idea that the USSR might really confront and act on the need for certain basic reforms is treated as a maverick idea, and not given the space it deserves. On balance, I guess I share the view that it is unlikely, but it worries me that conventional wisdom tends to dismiss it out of hand. I am not talking about reform that would make the USSR like the West (there are too many centuries of history to overcome) but we could be in for some changes over the next 10 to 15 years which, when examined in hindsight, would seem far more dramatic than was registered at the time they occurred.

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For Douglas J. MacEachin